

Tips and Strategies to Create an Inclusive Classroom

“A philosophy of teaching that provides equal opportunities for all students to have a successful learning experience.” — (Dewsbury, 2017)

At its core, inclusive teaching is just good teaching. Students come to our classrooms with unique sets of experiences, backgrounds, challenges and strengths. It’s our responsibility as educators to provide them with an effective learning experience and an equal opportunity to succeed. This might seem like a herculean task but small and strategic changes can yield big outcomes. This guide will introduce some “small” changes that you can implement to create a positive climate that will benefit **all** your students. This guide is not a quick fix. It’s just a step in the right direction.

How to design courses that are inclusive of all students?

There are few principles to follow towards creating an inclusive learning environment.

1) Create a sense of belonging

To create an inclusive classroom, the instructor implements strategies that support meaningful and accessible learning for all students and promotes a sense of belonging to foster student success. Some of these strategies are centred around building a community.

- **Introductory video**

Create a video to introduce yourself and your course to students. In your video, try to include personal as well as professional information. Doing that allows your students to see you as approachable and knowledgeable. A video is also a great opportunity to talk about the course, to convey your enthusiasm for your subject matter, and to introduce your student to the applicability of the course to their lives and careers.

- **Growth mindset**

Communicate to your students your high expectations and your belief that all students can succeed. Emphasize that struggle and challenge are important parts of the learning process, rather than signs of student deficiency. This can be part of your introduction and regularly during the course thereafter. One way of doing this is to share your personal experiences and remember that sometimes it’s okay to be “vulnerable”.

- **Student introductions**

In the same way that you made a video to introduce yourself, ask students to introduce themselves to the class using a creative presentation format (Powtoon, puppets, Flipgrid, etc.). Students can then post their introductory video to a discussion board in the LMS. If you are teaching a large class, you can divide the class into groups and have students introduce themselves to their groups.

- **First-day survey**

The first day of class is a great opportunity to set the tone for the semester. Sending out a short survey at the beginning of the semester to collect information about your students that will help you get to know them better tells the students that you are interested in each and every one of them and that you care about their personal backgrounds. Here is a link to an info sheet to send your students (Killpack & Melon 2020)

- **Icebreaker activity**

In the first day/week of class, assign a fun exercise related to the course material to help students get to know one another. Iowas State University has a number of [icebreaker activities](#) to use in online courses. Consider reviewing the OTL “List of Icebreakers” for ideas.

- **Consistent and regular communication**

A crucial element to help students develop a sense of belonging is by maintaining regular contact. To achieve this you can send your class weekly emails or announcements. When sending announcements to your class, consider using various media such as short videos or podcasts. This will align with the UDL guidelines. These short announcements are a great way to remind students about deadlines, offer help, and share resources.

- **Individual contact**

If you are teaching a small size class, consider creating rapport with your students by contacting each one of them individually to say hello, welcome him or her to the course, and get acquainted. If you are teaching a large enrollment class, consider sending a welcome email in addition to the first-day survey. Also, consider asking your teaching/instructional assistant to monitor student participation. If you or your IA/TA notice that a student has “checked out”, consider sending them an email to offer help and support.

- **Pronounce students names correctly**

Learn and use students’ names and pronouns; learn what they choose to be called (which may differ from a name on a roster) and how it’s pronounced. Encourage students to learn and use one another’s names, correctly pronounced. Also ask students about their preferred pronoun and encourage them to come talk to you if that is more comfortable for them. Check this article to learn more about why using correct names matters.

2) Syllabus and Course Content

- **Content of syllabus**

Make your syllabus as comprehensive as possible. Students may not read it thoroughly but it’s a good reference for when they need information. Consider reviewing the OTL “Inclusive Syllabus Checklist” for ideas on what to include in your syllabus.

When developing your course calendar and scheduling major projects, presentations, exams, and course events, review the Interfaith Calendar website (<http://www.interfaith-calendar.org/>) for world religion sacred dates. Students sometimes, due to self esteem issues, might just miss class and exams rather than ask for accommodation.

- **Add an inclusion and diversity statement**

The purpose of adding an inclusion and diversity statement to your syllabi is to help students understand the importance and relevance of diversity and inclusion. A diversity and inclusion statement also shows your students that you care and respect each and everyone of them. That you value diversity and are aware of the current discussions in the country. Consider reviewing the OTL samples of “Inclusion and Diversity Statements” for ideas on what to include in your syllabus.

- **Tone of course documents**

When developing course documents such as a syllabus, consider using a more relaxed, conversational tone. Research suggests that students rate instructors who use “warm” language in their syllabi as both more approachable and more motivated to teach the class (Harnish and Bridges 2011).

- **Textbooks and Resources**

When deciding which textbook and or articles you want your students to use in your class, select authors from diverse backgrounds. This will help your minority students feel represented. Also, try to emphasize the range of identities and backgrounds of experts who have contributed to your field, and/ or sponsor discussion about the reasons for a history of limited access to the field.

- **Other course material**

Be intentional in selecting media and course material such as videos, blogs, and images that reflect diverse people, voices and perspectives. When using examples from pop culture, try to provide a context so that students who are not familiar

with that specific culture can still understand the illustration. When using a quote from a movie, include the title and a short explanation.

Avoid using jargon and highly idiomatic expressions. While the expression might seem straightforward to you, it might be unfamiliar to your international students (e.g. “butter wouldn’t melt...” or “a rolling stone gathers no moss”).

3) Teaching Strategies

- **Presenting content**

When delivering a lecture, be intentional in the choice of material and language used. Avoid using statements like “As you all probably know” or “It’s very easy to see” or “The answer is very obvious”. Such statements could alienate the students who don’t know the answer and discourage them from continuing to learn.

- **Checking for understanding**

Avoid assuming that your students have understood the material you are introducing when they nod and respond “yes” nod to your “is that clear?” question. One way to go around this is to use concept questions. These are questions that check the understanding of difficult aspects of the target concept in terms of function, meaning etc. below are examples of concept check questions.:

- a. yes/no questions e.g. “does X means this?”
- b. discrimination questions e.g “does X refer to ____ or to ____ ”
- c. Visuals e.g. “which graph corresponds to X?”

- **Activating prior knowledge**

Assess students’ prior knowledge about your field and topics so you can accurately align instruction with their strengths and needs. Also, help students connect their prior knowledge to new learning (e.g., when introducing a new topic, ask students individually to reflect on what they already know about the topic).

- **Personalizing content**

Your course material presents a great opportunity for personalization. Consider your worksheets or any other instructional material as an opportunity to individualize your course. You could imbue them with your own style and personality. Adding a little bit of humor can also help students feel more connected and engaged and see you as more approachable.

- **Using Active Learning**

Use interactive/dynamic lecturing as a mode of delivery. In this mode, lectures are divided into segments. A lecturing segment where students are introduced to concepts and ideas, and activity segments where students interact with the content and/or with each other. Consider reviewing OTL “Active Learning Strategies” for examples of activities.

- **Implementing Group work**

Group work is a great opportunity for students to interact with each other and to build a sense of community. When assigning group projects, encourage groups to choose a name. This can help create a sense of group identity and belonging. Also, consider putting students into small discussion groups for the entire semester to promote bonding.

- **Including students in decision making**

Ask the students to brainstorm guidelines for various activities such as discussion, group work, submission dates etc. Then, as a group decide on a set of guidelines.

- **Encouraging equitable participation**

- Build in reflection time to allow all students to gather and formulate their thoughts before answering questions.
- Share discussion questions with students ahead of time so students can think about them before class.
- Remind students to take turns and to allow others to speak. Using a “Talking Chips” activity to ensure all students participate.

4) Assessment

- **Be transparent**

Explicitly communicate to students all relevant information. This includes information about exams, assignments, discussion guidelines etc. Explain the purpose of your assessments and how they relate to the course learning outcomes.

- **Use a rubric**

Try to provide clear rubrics and sample assignments for students to review prior to exams.

- **Evaluation practices**

A best practice in teaching, in general, is to give students frequent and targeted feedback on their assignments so that they can change their learning strategies and/or seek additional help. When giving specific and actionable feedback, use language that conveys kindness and empathy.

- **Student Feedback**

Seeking anonymous feedback on the course climate is a great way to convey to your students that their voice is heard and that their perspectives are valued. Make sure to review all comments and to report back to your students at the next class session in order to validate their input. To seek feedback you can use The Plus/Change Questionnaire or The Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 2017). See Appendices A and B below for descriptions.

Appendix A: The Plus/Change Questionnaire

Plus	Change
What is helping me to learn in this class?	What am I doing to improve my learning in the course?
What changes are needed in this course to improve learning?	What do I need to do to improve my learning in this course?

Appendix B: The Critical Incident Questionnaire

The [Critical Incident Questionnaire](#) (Brookfield, 2017) is done periodically and has five questions:

- At what moment in class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
- At what moment in the class were you most distanced from what was happening?
- What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?

- What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be about your reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else)

References

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